

The Head of the Dunce in Pope's *Dunciad in Four Books*

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ABSTRACT

Alexander Pope's 1743 *Dunciad in Four Books* and its preceding iterations were a reaction to rapidly shifting eighteenth-century culture. With the rise of Grub Street hack writers and undeserving Poet Laureates like Lewis Theobald and Colley Cibber, Pope saw the fall of British civilization. The mock-epic *Dunciad* portrays this degradation with the progress of the goddess Dulness through London and her eventual and inevitable return of Britain to darkness and chaos. Many of Pope's contemporaries are depicted as acolytes of Dulness, with a complex footnote system explicating their inclusion on the basis of their works, political alignments, education, patronage, or even disagreements with Pope. These representations of eighteenth-century print culture are not only comedic on an individual level; rather, they participate in and reinforce Pope's overarching satire.

Within this context, the following study closely examines Pope's satirical construction of the "dunce-head" with a particular focus on the physical aspects of the skulls of the dunces. The facial features of the dunces, whether dull, twisting, or asinine, are the most obvious visual indicators of Dulness. However, the satire is extended by Pope's conception of the skull as a physical container, in which the brain fluids of the dunces are no better than lead or brass. The mud, owls, poets' bays, and other materials perched on the dunces' crowns also contribute to the parody. Finally, Pope's establishment of the dunce-head as a passive object, with the few notable exceptions such as its propensity for noise-making, concludes the study. These crucial visual signifiers and their combination with Pope's complex abstract conception of Dulness shifts the dunce-head from mere caricature and mocked object to a satirical symbol. The *Dunciad*, a brilliant lampoon of eighteenth century print culture, has an archetypal skull at the center of its satire: the dull, braying, filth-covered dunce-head.

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For the wicked wasp of Twickenham,
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERMISSION TO USE.....	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. THE SCHOLARLY FIELD AND THE HEADS OF THE DUNCES.....	1
3. THE FACIAL FEATURES OF THE DUNCE.....	4
4. ZIG-ZAGS OF LEAD: THE HEAD AS A CONTAINER.....	13
5. THE ENVIRONS OF THE HEAD.....	16
6. THE DUNCE-HEAD'S DYNAMIC SKULL.....	22
7. CONCLUSION.....	20
8. WORKS CITED.....	21

Introduction

What does it mean to have a “Cibberian forehead, and a Cibberian brain,” and how is that status connected to the fall of civilization? In the 1743 *Dunciad in Four Books*, Alexander Pope constructs a composite image of the heads of the dunces, or those who will lead the way back to a dark era where Grub Street hack writers are hailed as the height of culture. But what does this head actually look like?

Envision a man’s head. The “pert, flat” eyes are lively and rolling, but they remain dull and one-dimensional (I.124).¹ The head is “Earless”; the hearing organs have been clipped (II.147). The mouth and nose are being twisted and deformed by the expressions passing over the face: now a “Parnassian sneer,” followed by “The conscious simper, and the jealous leer” (II.5-6). His eyes dart, sometimes following the viewer, but just as often directed towards other objects in the room or at empty space. Walking around the head to look at the cracked open brain, one sees “Zig-zags” darting chaotically and seeping with a dull, grey liquid (I.124). On a stand nearby sits a variety of headgear the viewer is invited to place on the head, ranging from cardinals’ hats and poets’ laurels to owls and a bucket of mud. Returning to the front, one notes a volume dial, currently set to mute. One turns it up, only to turn it down quickly as the “chatt’ring” and “jabbr’ing” echoes throughout the room (II.237). Finally, as one leaves the room, the head begins to nod and fall asleep. Such heads proliferate in the *Dunciad*; in fact, they and their features are the most referred to body parts in Pope’s mock-epic.

The features of what I call the “dunce-head” are an important part of the satire that Pope uses to identify and criticize both individual dunces and dunce-dom in general. The external appearance of the skull, the descriptions of its internal workings, the figurative references to the cranium, and even what surrounds or comes into contact with the head are all tools used by Pope in his larger work to comment on the shifts occurring in eighteenth-century writing and print culture. The dunce-head, sprinkled with Cimmerian dew, covered with mud and excrement, is a clear symbol of Dulness and an easy target for Pope.

The Scholarly Field and the Heads of the Dunces

Although numerous studies have been written on the dunces, few have focused on the skulls of the likes of Cibber and Settle. One exception is Raymond Stephanson’s research on the

¹ All quotations are from Rumbold’s *Alexander Pope: The Dunciad in Four Books*, and will be cited parenthetically in the text by book and line number, excepting Rumbold’s own observations which will be cited by page.

conception of the “brain-womb” and “pregnant skull” of the poet during the eighteenth century, wherein he points out that male poets’ creativity was imagined as being very close to pregnancy.² Predictably, a poem springing from the father of the likes of Pope or Swift would be well-formed and healthy; however, “in the wrong brain – that of the dunce, the Modern, one’s enemy in the literary world – the result was perverse conception, miscarriage, abortion, still-born foetus, monstrous birth, or deformed offspring” (119). Stephanson also comments on the appearance of the poet Orpheus’ head in the *Dunciad*’s epigraph, noting that the Orphic head is constructed as a contrast that is never truly present but remains offstage as a thematic reminder of the skull superior to those of the dunces (186).

Another important aspect of the *Dunciad*, as noted by John Sitter, Valerie Rumbold, and other scholars interested in the historical and cultural aspects of the *Dunciad*, is Pope’s creation of an alternate history in which the dunces’ histories or personal attributes are made to fit the purpose of the *Dunciad*, a situation in which I propose Pope uses the head as a way to simultaneously subvert, expose, and reinforce the alterations, both subtle and obvious, that occur within the *Dunciad*, all while maintaining his satirical tone. Sitter notes that, in the *Dunciad*, “history is subjugated to the logic and requisites of myth” and the various named individuals become “significant only as the offspring of the mythical ‘Mighty Mother’” (107).³ Such manipulations are often most obvious in Pope’s annotations, wherein biographical information slanted towards Pope’s purpose or simply drawing from popular rumour is presented (or misrepresented) to support the arguments made elsewhere in the text. The physical appearance of the various dunce-heads throughout the *Dunciad* is subjected to this same specific perspective; as Aubrey Williams notes in his seminal study of the *Dunciad*, “[Pope] alters the personages of his poem to make them appear more perfect vehicles for his subject — dulness in human kind” (64).⁴ Purposeful errors like Elkanah Settle’s visit to the pillory demonstrate not only the explicatory relationship between the poem and the annotations, but also the complexity the reader must negotiate when reading the highly satirical tone of the footnotes. Such fictionalizations are related to the simultaneous reduction and raising of the skull of the dunce to a symbol of Dulness. Williams also writes that “Local personal material [i.e., the name of the dunce] . . . becomes the bridge by which we cross to a land of larger values” (52), while Sitter

² For an extensive discussion of the eighteenth century “brain-womb,” see Stephanson, 179-190.

³ For Sitter’s discussion of the *Dunciad* and its characters as abstractions, see chapter 3.

⁴ For Williams’ discussion of Pope’s manipulation of history, see 60-76.

describes how “the *Dunciad* is rooted more deeply in abstraction than in fact,” or, perhaps more accurately, the “facts are collectively subjected to an abstraction” (68). In this same fashion, the physical head of a Cibber, Defoe, or Settle is the literal embodiment of dullness. Of course, Dulness does not limit her targets only to writers and publishers like Curll who were firmly embedded in the Grub Street culture; the great goddess also targets schoolmasters, priests, lawyers, and the gentry, broadening the symbol of the dunce-head to include any group vulnerable or open to the Great Goddess’ values.

Other writings mentioning the head refer to its surroundings, qualities, or actions. J. B. Trapp addresses the shifting concept of the ivy and bays, plants often seen adorning the brows of the dunces, throughout history.⁵ Williams comments on the dunces’ actions in the first three Books and the final Book, noting that the way in which Pope reveals “duncery” shifts from through the annotations to the dunces’ own actions and speech.⁶ The head also appears briefly in Sitter’s research, as he discusses the “emblematic nonexpression” of the dunces’ faces and the usage of terms like blockhead.⁷ However, while all of the above scholars may incorporate the skulls of the dunces in small ways, no dedicated study of the dunce-head has as yet been completed.

In this context, the following study closely examines Pope’s satirical construction of the “dunce-head,” with a particular focus on the physical aspects of the skulls of the dunces. The first layer of the satire includes the facial features of the dunces; blank eyes, twisting facial features, and cropped ears are all important visual signifiers of Dulness. These descriptions are extended by the conception of the head as a physical container, in which the brain fluids of the dunces are no better than lead or brass. The environment of the head is not to be ignored, either; mud, owls, poets’ bays, and other hats crown the dunces, each with their particular satiric connotation. Finally, the passivity of the head of a dunce, with the few notable exceptions such as its propensity for noise-making, is a crucial part of the complete development of the dunce-head concept. Pope’s careful construction of the dunce-head and its characteristics elevate the dunce-head from a simple object worthy of scorn to a complex satirical symbol that bows, dives, and brays its way throughout the *Dunciad*.

⁵ He expands on Pope’s usage of the ivy and bays within the context of the history dating from ancient Rome.

⁶ See, in particular, page 76.

⁷ See, in particular, Sitter’s discussion of Cibber and Haywood 28-29 and blockhead in the context of repression 43-45.

The Facial Features of the Dunce

The dunce-heads' features all serve Pope's invective, as they have clearly been influenced by Dulness. The most notable features, including the eyes, ears, and mouth are mocked; however, Pope is also more subtle, using facial expressions to convey a particular characterization of the dunces. All of these elements combine into a conglomerate dunce-head that is uniquely suited for Pope's satirical purpose, as it represents all the elements of Dulness in its busy, dull state.

When Dulness is forming the phantom poet in Book II for the dunces to chase, she creates "so just a copy of a wit; / So like, that critics said, and courtiers swore, / A wit it was, and call'd the phantom More"; in short, the Mighty Mother constructs an accurate representation of a dunce (II.48-50). After its bulk, the first features described are the "pert flat eyes" with which Dulness "window'd well its head" (II.43), signifying the eyes as a key feature of dullness. They may move in a sense reminiscent of madness, as Cibber's "eyes began to roll, / In pleasing memory of all he stole" or be still and placid, like Eliza Haywood's "ox-like eyes" and the eyes of the many dunces as they are falling asleep (I.127-128; II.164). The eyes, then, combine the two elements of dullness; thus, they can be "pert," lively, and active even as they are "flat," vapid, and spiritless. Furthermore, the eyes are represented as an organ that can transform others, but are also susceptible to another's gaze. This trait is exemplified in the beginning of Book II when Cibber, now sitting on his throne, looks down upon the worshipping dunces:

. . . All eyes direct their rays

On him, and crowds turn Coxcombs as they gaze

His Peers shine round him with reflected grace,

New edge their dulness, and new bronze their face. (II.7-10)

Pope is using the transformative powers of Cibber's stare to represent the corrupting power of the many works of Grub Street. Those who "gaze" upon Cibber become "coxcombs" or fools, and this effect occurs not only across individuals, but whole "crowds." In the following lines, Pope continues to play with the power of Cibber's scrutiny, implying that Cibber's implied "Peers" at court may also be influenced. Careful alliteration and parallel phrasing in the final line draw attention to particular characteristics. The "New edge" provided to "their dulness" incorporates the oxymoronic characteristics of dullness. The "new bronze" of "their face[s]" not only contributes to Pope's construction of the dunce-head as a "blockhead," but also implies

scatological comparisons through the brassy colour. However, the objects the dunces gaze upon, and are therefore influenced by, are limited in scope. Pope derisively describes where “There, dim in clouds, the poring Scholiasts mark, / Wits, who like owls, see only in the dark” (III.191-192). The eyes of a dunce, lively yet lifeless, are powerful yet weak and misused organs.

The ears also contribute in a multifaceted fashion to Pope’s construction of the satirical dunce-head in a visual sense. The ears in the *Dunciad* are often mentioned in concert with ear cropping, a punishment common throughout the eighteenth-century for those who ended up in the pillory. While all of the dunces in the *Dunciad* are being pilloried, in one way or another, for their actions, a few notable dunces bear the physical marks of their situation.⁸ The visible feature of ears, or lack thereof, becomes an important signal of a family inheritance of dullness. Dulness “saw, with joy, the line immortal run” as “She saw old Pryn in restless Daniel shine,” alluding to William Prynne, the symbolic ancestor of Defoe, having his ears cut off in the pillory for his political writing (I.99, 103). Unsurprisingly, later in the poem on a “shaggy Tap’stry” given to Curll following the chase of the phantom poets is a depiction of Prynne’s protégé, where “Earless on high, stood unabash’d De Foe” (II.143, 147). This pattern of a pilloried father is repeated again with Settle and Bays, the hero of the poem. Settle is also implied to be earless; however, his appearance is more complex. The poetic lines read “Wond’ring he [Cibber] gaz’d: When lo! a Sage appears, / By his broad shoulders known, and length of ears” (III.35-6); however, the annotations provide a conflicting layer of analysis and satire. “Length of ears” is vague, and considering the already established and lengthy comparisons to the asses during Book II, may be read understood by the uninformed that Settle is similar in appearance to the “long-ear’d milky mothers” (II.247). Alternatively, the line can be could imply that Settle had his ears cropped in the pillory, despite the accompanying pedantic note by Theobald and Scriblerus outlining how the line should read “years” as he “was (happily) a stranger to the *Pillory*” (III.36n). These lines are infused with irony and scorn, and to strengthen the satire, these “fates her confessors endure” are portrayed as a mark of honour to other dunces. Prominent dunces like Settle have been blessed with ear cropping, and others, like Defoe, are “unabash’d” about their time spent in the pillory. The ears, or lack thereof, are not only an important symbol of duncery, but also an important satiric stance that uses the readers’ associations with the pillory.

⁸ For an extensive discussion of the *Dunciads* as pillory, see Baines 150-160.

The final notable feature of the dunce-head, the mouth, is the most active of the dunce-head's parts and provides the crucial action of (mis)communication. The blank, dull eyes of the dunce-head are no window to the soul for Grub Street hacks and patrons; instead, the mouth, as one of the most expressive features both in terms of speaking and facial expression, exposes the dunces' feelings and inclinations. Like the eyes, the mouth and its shapes mix boldness and dullness. Cibber, hero of the poem, has the most description attached to his face; in fact, Book II opens with a description of his facial expressions.

Great Cibber sate: The proud Parnassian sneer,
The conscious simper, and the jealous leer,
Mix on his look: All eyes direct their rays
On him, and crowds turn Coxcombs as they gaze. (II.5-8)

These expressions passing over and, notably, mixing on Cibber's face are focused on the mouth as it twists through the "Parnassian sneer," the "conscious simper," and the "jealous leer." A look of contempt, shifting to the "foolish smile" of the simper and the "labored cast of countenance" of the leer create a face that is always attempting to manipulate others, whether through intimidation and arch looks or facile fawning (Johnson vol. 2 680, vol. 2 28). The only time the dunce-head is sincere is when it wears a sneer or other look of contempt; otherwise, the expressions are constructed to gain influence, wealth, and power. Sitter describes Cibber's and, later, Haywood's expressions as "emblematic nonexpression" (28); however, such countenances are also crucial in revealing the dunces' desires. These base yearnings of the dunces are what will bring about the decrepit society that Pope foresees; therefore, in addition to the Grub Street hacks, educators, clergymen, and other groups verbally proclaiming their allegiance to Dulness, the visual representation of their commitment and the corrupt cravings behind the pledge is significant as well, particularly considering the emphasis on graphic descriptions that proliferate throughout the work.

The facial features of the dunce-head, particularly the eyes, ears, and mouth, are important both in stillness and in motion. They provide a reliable way to recognize a dunce-head, whether through an outcome such as missing ears from time spent in the pillory or a shifting facial feature such as rolling eyes and twisting lips. These highly visible features, intricately connected to Pope's more abstract conception of the dunce-head, create a representation not only cartoonish and burlesque, but satirical; the dunce-head is a literal embodiment of the corruption

of eighteenth-century culture. A dunce is not deserving of scorn simply for having cropped ears or a leering expression; rather, the qualities that these descriptions represent are the target. Through this very essential and basic method, Pope creates the first, crucial layer of the dunce-head: the external appearance visible to, and deserving of aversion from, the reader.

Zig-Zags of Lead: The Head as a Container

The exterior of the head, while often described and referred to, is not the only important physical aspect of the head. Pope also uses descriptions of the interior qualities and physical construction of the dunces' craniums in his effort to shame the dunces and their supporters. Just as the exterior qualities of a dunce-head can indicate a dull intellect, so too can the contents of the skull, and Pope uses the dual qualities of volatility and inertness to characterize the more hidden features of the likes of Settle and Curll.

Early in Book I, the reader is introduced to Cibber, Dulness' chosen hero, who is vexed by his inability to write. After providing the reader with a vivid description of Cibber's failings and frustration, Cibber's skull is cracked open to reveal the deformed workings of his brain.

Swearing and supperless the Hero sate,
Blasphem'd his Gods, the Dice, and damn'd his Fate.
Then gnaw'd his pen, then dash'd it on the ground,
Sinking from thought to thought, a vast profound!
Plung'd for his sense, but found no bottom there,
Yet wrote and flounder'd on, in mere despair.
Round him much Embryo, much Abortion lay,
Much future Ode, and abdicated Play;
Nonsense precipitate, like running Lead,
That slip'd thro' Cracks and Zig-zags of the Head;
All that on Folly Frenzy could beget,
Fruits of dull Heat, and Sooterkins of Wit. (I.115-126)

This stanza satirically dramatizes the internal working of Cibber's head which, combined with or perhaps even caused by the inspiration of Dulness, is the source of the inferior writing and thinking Cibber has been attempting. His creativity depends on chance and chaos, and yet even his "Dice" have failed him. In addition to the dice, he blames "his Gods" and "Fate," refusing to acknowledge responsibility for the deformed pieces. Nonsense has been so concentrated and

condensed that it has taken a physical form, reflecting the impossible extent of Cibber's dullness; instead of the animal spirits or other nervous and brain matter often referred to by science throughout the eighteenth century, Cibber's head contains distilled dullness in the form of liquid lead. This material, setting Bays apart from the other, biologically normal members of his time, is compared to lead, a metal which reflects the qualities of dullness as it is heavy and dull, but is fluid when heated. The downward slipping of the lead lends an air of uncontrolled and accidental movement; just as Cibber throws his pen to the ground and his thoughts and sense are following a seemingly inevitable downward trend, so too is the physical material poorly contained within Cibber's skull, slowly slipping through what Rumbold calls the "leaky tank of his brain" (116). The chaos of the earlier lines when Cibber curses dice is echoed here, as nothing in Cibber's thought process proceeds in a straight line. Zig-zags and cracks lend an air of brokenness and fragility. This brain is broken, allowing the material to "slip" through it, and, therefore, Cibber can produce nothing but abortions and deformed creatures. The fractured inner workings of Cibber's dunce-head are a reflection of, and portrayed as a cause of, the prolific and mediocre works symbolized by the "Embryo" and "Abortion" that clutters the floor at his feet.

These zig-zags are the most specific reference to the inside of the dunce-head, but the model of the skull as a container occurs multiple times throughout the *Dunciad*. Generally, when the head and its conception as a container are mentioned, the overarching theme is one of passivity. The skulls of the dunces, made "Of solid proof, impenetrably dull," are a primary target for educators, politicians, and writers who view it as a space to be filled (III.26). The dunce-heads often end up as paradoxically completely full and utterly empty; Pope carefully depicts both states at the same time in order to reinforce his criticisms of the many groups of dunces. Therefore, the educators stock their young clients with "A Lumberhouse of books in ev'ry head, / For ever reading, never to be read!" and "stuff the head / With all such reading as was never read" (III.193-194; IV.253-254). In such descriptions, Pope uses the physical construction of the skull as a receptacle to insult Grub Street hacks for misusing and misreading the classical works which the Augustans held in high respect. The educational system is implicit in this criticism as well, as the universities are essentially training grounds for dunces where their vessel of a brain can be stuffed with the values of Dulness.

A related and critical part of the dunce-head as a container is the common appearance of the term "blockhead" and its associated connotations. Pope uses blockhead only 6 times scattered

in the rest of his poetic canon; in comparison, it appears 4 times in Books III and IV of the *Dunciad in Four Books*. With multiple other metaphorical references throughout the work, “blockhead” is used as a general insult ranging from characters like Benlowes, a writer “propitious still to blockheads” or any of the other dunces “Who rhym’d for hire, and patroniz’d for pride” (III.21; IV.102). Because of the wide variety of blockheads in the *Dunciad*, the term is an apt synonym for the dunce-head, applying not just to the hack writers in the garrets of Grub Street, but the patrons, politicians, and educators involved in furthering Dulness’ goals as well. “Blockhead” summarizes the qualities of dullness very accurately, as the definitions of the two terms in Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* reflect. A “dunce” is “A dullard; a dolt; a thickskull; a stupid indocile animal” (vol. 1 664). A blockhead, similarly, is described as “A stupid fellow; a dolt; a man without parts” (vol. 1 228). Rather, the “parts” are replaced with other materials, such as the “Zig-zags” of lead and the “brain of feathers” that Dulness gives to the wit (I.124; II.44). Pope also extends the criticism by a reference to the practice of how “Patrons, who sneak from living worth to dead, / With-hold the pension, and set up the head,” alluding to patrons spending money on dead poets instead of the living who might be able to put the funds to good use. Through this reference to an actual practice, Pope reinforces his criticism is not only of individual writers, but shifting print culture as a whole.

The physicality of the term blockhead is ever present and is initially constructed in relation to Cibber’s mystical brothers in the couplet “Where o’er the gates, by his fam’d father’s hand / Great Cibber’s brazen, brainless brothers stand” (I.32-33). These statues, representing Melancholy Madness and Raving Madness, were at the time over the entrance to Bedlam mental hospital; the first layer of this familial association, then, connects Colley Cibber with the madness of the Bedlam patients.⁹ These statues, close relatives of the *Dunciad*’s hero, are literal blockheads; inside their heads, perhaps, one expects to find even more nonsense precipitate similar to that in Bays’ “Zig-zags” (I.124). However, despite Pope’s application of “brazen,” the statues were made of stone, a point which Pope acknowledges and uses to his own benefit in the annotations. The footnote records how “Mr. Cibber remonstrated that his brothers at Bedlam, mentioned Book i. were not *Brazen*, but *Blocks*; yet our author let it pass unaltered, as a trifle, that no way lessened the Relationship” (II.3n). “Brazen,” however, is a far more flexible term, as

⁹ See Morris for a discussion of the relationship of Bedlam to the eighteenth-century conception of madness and the dunces.

Pope demonstrates when he takes advantage of the multiple meanings of the expression; Johnson's *Dictionary* describes it as "to be impudent," but also notes that objects having the description of brazen may have appearance of brass (vol.1 280). This strongly visual reference also holds a layer of scatological association, considering the colour of the metal. Brass, a mixture of copper and zinc, is also relatively cheap and easy to procure, much like the dunces' work, creating an additional potential link between the dunces, their work, and statues. Cibbers' other "brazen, brainless brothers" among the dunces also exhibit "brassy" characteristics, whether it is Defoe standing "unabash'd" on the pillory or Curll's easy acceptance of the brass-coloured "dishonours" of his face after falling in Corinna's "evening cates" during the race (I.33; II.108, 72). The material connotations of the term "blockhead," therefore, are used by Pope to add an extra layer of meaning to the dull insult.

The Environs of the Head

The dunce-head cannot, of course, be considered in isolation; the surroundings of the various craniums in the *Dunciad* are only slightly less significant than the physical aspects described earlier. The setting emphasizes the location of London and, after the initial scene with a solitary Cibber, the sheer number of dunces and amount of duncery; however, the satirical influence of the environment goes further. The surroundings of a skull may indicate an association with dullness and are an important way for Pope to extend his criticism beyond the targeted writers of Grub Street to other groups such as patrons, educators, and other proponents of Dulness. Pope's satirical treatment of the dunces that begins with the core characteristics of their skulls is enhanced by the vivid imagery he uses in describing the accoutrements that perch on and drift around their heads.

Consider, for example, the laurels that appear throughout the work. Laurels indicated a poet's skill and were connected to Apollo, the Greek god associated with poetry.¹⁰ In 1743, as the new hero of Colley Cibber takes over from Tibbald, the protagonist of the *Dunciad* now bears an obvious reference to the practice of laurel giving in his given designation of Bays, a direct reference to the bay laurels that were given to the relatively unworthy playwright and actor. Pope was sometimes depicted wearing the laurels¹¹; however, the formerly high value

¹⁰ For a discussion of the development of the meaning of laurels, see J. B. Trapp's "The Owl's Ivy and the Poet's Bays: An Enquiry into Poetic Garlands."

¹¹ For an example of Pope wearing the laurels, see *Alexander Pope* by Jonathan Richardson, circa 1737, in the National Portrait Gallery (NPG 1179).

attached to laurels has been degraded, along with the other aspects of culture Pope is criticizing, as hack writers, deluded patrons, and poor critics “give from fool to fool the Laurel crown” (IV.98). The laurels and what they signify are subverted by Dulness and the dunces; however, Pope increases the satiric influence of the laurels as he mixes them with other significant materials, adding physical symbols of their figurative decline. In Book III, Settle wonders about the unknowable number of “all who since, in mild benighted days, / Mix’d the Owl’s ivy with the Poet’s bays” (III.53-53). The association of the owl, symbol of Dulness, creates an emblem of banality and lowliness, but also implies that the “Owl’s ivy” may have gone unnoticed, mixed among the “Poet’s bays,” indicating a sort of creeping subversive dullness. Later, on the “beaver’d brow” of dunce Richard Busby, a headmaster of Westminster half a century earlier, a “birchen garland” appears, implying that he has taken disciplining students through whipping to a new height (IV.141). In addition to laurels, ivy, and birch, opium also appear on the brows of the dunces. In her “sacred Dome” she kept “her Opium,” a drug that creates a stupor similar to dullness, making the plant an apt emblem of Dulness (I.265, 271). “Shadwell nods the Poppy on his brows,” but he is not the only dunce to wear or, it is implied, use the drug; Bavius, who “dips poetic souls” to make them dull, is ordered to “take the poppy from thy brow, / And place it here! here all ye Heroes, bow!” (II.21; II.24; III.317-8). When Cibber, “Th’ Augustus born to bring Saturnian times,” receives the poppy upon his head, Pope’s ironic voice cries “See, see, our own true Phoebus wears the bays!” (III.320; III.323). Just as Phoebus is an ideal form for poets such as Pope, Cibber is identified as an ideal for dunce-heads, crowned with laurels, poppies, and Cimmerian dew.

Owls also appear near the head, a strategy Pope uses to make the connection between his scorned enemies and the Great Goddess more explicit. Owls are the herald of Dulness and her favoured animal; her “sacred Dome” is where she “nurs’d her owls,” and when she is to come forth, “the Owl forsook his bow’r” (I.265; I.271; IV.11). The relationship of the owls to Dulness may remind the reader of her similar actions regarding her human minions: she takes Cibber to her “sacred Dome,” and she comforts Cibber tenderly on her lap. Considering this close relationship between Dulness, the dunces, and the owls, it is unsurprising that the owls then often appear in the vicinity of the dunces’ heads. The most significant visitation of an owl is right after Dulness chooses Cibber as her chosen dunce.

The Goddess then, o'er his anointed head,
 With mystic words, the sacred Opium shed.
 And, lo! her bird (a monster of a fowl,
 Something betwixt a Heideggre and owl,)
 Perch'd on his crown. 'All hail! and hail again,
 My son! the promis'd land expects thy reign. (I.287-292)

The first event that happens after Dulness has anointed him with opium is the recognition by an owl-like figure which, after a fashion, serves as his crown. The proclamation of his crowning and the following cheering does not begin until after the owl lands on his skull. Like the dunces, this creature is something unnatural, a mix of the ugly Swiss Heidegger and Dulness' chosen bird. Heidegger promoted foreign entertainments like opera and masquerade, popular forms of theatre that indicated further degradation of British values and culture for Pope. Cibber's deformed intellect, exposed in the twistings and turnings of his brain a few stanzas earlier, is reflected in his deformed crown. The Heidegger-owl is a twisted form of Athena's owl, a figure typically associated with wisdom. Just as the classical verse valued by Augustans like Pope and Swift has been manipulated and misused, so too has the owl, one of the embodiments of this tradition, been mutated into this monstrous creature.

Perhaps the most amusing, indicative, and beautifully simple headgear of the dunces, however, is the muck that often drips off their skulls. This mixture of mud, excrement, and any other materials to be found in the ditches of London carries both obvious scatological connotations as well as convincing satirical overtones. Consider, for example, when Curll falls in Corinna's "evening cates" (II.72):

Obscene with filth the miscreant lies bewray'd,
 Fal'n in the plash his wickedness had laid:
 . . .
 Renew'd by ordure's sympathetic force,
 As oil'd with magic juices for the course,
 Vig'rous he rises; from th' effluvia strong
 Imbibes new life, and scours and stinks along;
 Re-passes Lintot, vindicates the race,
 Nor heeds the brown dishonours of his face. (II.75-108)

Earlier, Cibber was associated with filth through a more subtle reference to his “brazen” brothers; here, however, the association is overt. The mess into which he falls is a result of his own work, and he becomes “Obscene with filth” to an indecent and offensive degree; however, this very obscenity is what results in his blessing by Cloacina and subsequent winning of the race. He has fallen into refuse, but he “Vig’rous . . . rises” because of the “ordure’s sympathetic force”; instead of a familial relationship as is explored with Cibber’s brothers, the connection between Cibber and shit is a “sympathetic” one where the feelings and emotions result in a personal understanding and reaction. Cibber is lowered not only to the physical level of excrement by falling to the ground, but to the mental and emotional level as well.

In a similar fashion, the diving competition following the race is even more infused with mire than the race. Pope uses the Fleet Ditch, one of the most infamous landmarks in London known for the variety of refuse muddying its waters, as the setting for a competition in which the dunces attempt to dive the deepest into its muddy depths. Though most of the divers end up sullied by the water and other materials lying beneath its depths, the rising of Smedley, the second diver who disappeared back at line 292, is by far the most representative of Pope’s careful and comic manipulation of the perception of the filth of Fleet Ditch as disgusting to the reader, but normal and even honourable and fascinating to the dunces.

When, lo! a burst of thunder shook the flood.

Slow rose a form, in majesty of Mud:

Shaking the horrors of his sable brows,

And each ferocious feature grim with ooze.

Greater he looks, and more than mortal stares:

Then thus the wonders of the deep declares. (II.325-330)

The other actions of the book are directly interrupted by the rising of Smedley, whose rising is accompanied by both noise and motion. By using “the flood,” Pope allows for the dual reading of either the flood of dunces, or the flood of the ditch, establishing yet another parallel between the dull waters and the dull dunces. The figure of Smedley is dehumanized; he is “a form.” Mud, excrement, and all the other “horrors” of the Fleet Ditch are treated as awesome, awful things, yet being swathed in a “majesty of mud” takes on a positive tone. The clever phrasing continues with the use of words like “sable” that bring to mind the robes of royalty. What exactly consists of the “horrors of his sable brows” is left ambiguous, leaving the reader’s imagination and

familiarity with Fleet Ditch to embellish the visual image of a monster rising from the depths. Again, the focus of the description is on the head; just as Arnall earlier “brings up half the bottom on his head” to the cheers of the crowd, all the “mud,” “horrors,” and “ooze” collect about Smedley’s “brows” and “each ferocious feature” of his face (II.321). After his travel to the Fleet Ditch underworld, now “Greater he looks, and more than mortal stares,” both actions associated with the organs of the skull. This “othering” of the head is reminiscent of the Heidegger-owl crowning of Cibber, except that this time the dunce has been mixed and mutated with that other symbol of dullness, the muck and mire of Fleet Ditch, the collector of the waste of London whose odours “Intoxicates the pert, and lulls the grave” (II.343). Such descriptions and clever lines, even as they amuse and delight the reader, serve to portray the dunce-head as something other than human and deserving of scorn.

Not all dunces can be easily identified by laurels, owls, or mud, however; many of the dunces’ “crowns” are more subtle and can provide a disguise of sorts. Obvious examples include the invisible anointment of Cibber with “sacred opium,” and his later sprinkling of “Cimmerian dew”; however, dunce-heads sometimes wear headgear which the reader would not expect a dunce to wear. For example, after Cibber has been crowned and Dulness “proclaims / By herald Hawkers, high heroic Games,” “all her Race: An endless band / Pours forth, and leaves unpeopled half the land” (II.17-18, 19-20). This “motley mixture” consists not only of writers, however, but includes politicians, religious leaders, educators, and other patrons of Dulness and Grub Street.

A motley mixture! in long wigs, in bags,
 In silks, in crapes, in Garters, and in rags,
 From drawing rooms, from colleges, from garrets,
 On horse, on foot, in hacks, and gilded chariots:
 All who true Dunces in her cause appear’d,
 And all who knew those Dunces to reward. (II.21-26)

These lines, with their repetitive list structure, emphasize the diverse mix of dunces from different social situations. “Long wigs,” preferred by an older generation, appear next to the more fashionable “bags,” black silk bags which gathered the hair at the back of the head. The variety of dunces is stressed in other locations as well. The clergy comes under a particular focus; Cibber is compared to Querno, the “Antichrist of Wit,” surrounded by “scarlet hats wide-

waving circled round,” and later references to “Broad hats, and hoods, and caps, a sable shoal” make the accusations of duncery quite plain (II.16, 14; IV.190). Members of the university community are also identified by their headgear, as Pope mocks “Whate’er of dunce in College or in Town / Sneers at another, in toupee or gown” and the “gold cap youths” who “lug the pond’rous volume off in state (IV.87-88, 117, 118). Sometimes, the headgear can also take a turn for the fanciful, like the “tribe” of antiquaries who are “with weeds and shells fantastic crown’d” (IV.398); however, often the headgear is kept realistic in order to display the many different groups that Pope is critiquing.

The most notable scene involving the surroundings of the dunce-head is in the beginning of Book III when Cibber sleeps on Dulness’ lap. The scene is at once sexual, incestuous, and infantile, as Cibber, the figurative child of Dulness, places his head, or mental reproductive system, near Dulness’ reproductive genitals and womb. It is not surprising, then, that Book III contains all the chaotic dream-scapes following Cibber’s descent into sleep.

Hence the Fool’s Paradise, the Statesman’s Scheme,
 The air-built Castle, and the golden Dream,
 The Maid’s romantic wish, the Chemist’s flame,
 And Poet’s vision of eternal fame. (III.9-12)

Cibber, the penultimate dunce, is surrounded by his own odd dreamscapes, all of which are emphasized as unattainable. This “position of marvelous virtue . . . causes all the Visions of wild enthusiasts, projectors, politicians, innamoratos, castle-builders, chemists, and poets” (Book the Third, Argument). Even as the surroundings of the dunce-head depict the dunces as coming from many different backgrounds, such as the universities, the churches, the courts, or the garrets of Grub Street, they are all similarly inspired by and often surrounded by the dreams of Dulness. Of course, this environment is not so different from what the dunces are surrounded with during their waking hours as they have false visions of grandeur and write works that are relatively worthless, despite assertions to the contrary; they are inevitably surrounded by their aborted and deformed works.

By carefully constructing the physical description of the dunce-head, as well as what surrounds it, Pope controls the perspective of the skulls of the Grub Street hacks and other agents of Dulness. Without the scatological insinuations of the mud of Fleet Ditch, the subverted

implications of the laurels, and the other environs of dunces' craniums, the dunce-heads' central position in the satire would be greatly weakened.

The Dunce-head's Dynamic Skull

Thus far, we have established that the dunce-head's physical description and its surroundings are inherently tied to Pope's construction of the skull as an object. Others may perform actions upon these craniums, but the dunce-head rarely executes any actions of its own; in these interactions (or lack thereof), the dunce-head is characterized as passive. Sitter notes that "the dunces are products rather than masters of their environment," and just as its blockhead signifier implies, the dunce-head is often treated as an object (62). The educators in Books III and IV, for example, treat the head as the empty container as described earlier; the students have no choice in what is put into their head. Consider again the following sets of lines:

A Lumberhouse of books in every head,
For ever reading, never to be read! (III.193-194)
We ply the Memory, we load the brain, (IV.157)
For thee we dim the eyes, and stuff the head
With all such reading as was never read: (IV.249-250)

When taken in concert, these lines are indicative of the dual strategy Pope employs in his characterization of the dunce skull. It is a thinking object that is ignorant, passive, or willing enough to accept whatever is put into it. No signs of resistance exist in these lines; the dunces do not seem to struggle. Similarly, during Book II when Dulness proposes a "gentler exercise to close the games," the dunces cannot help but fall asleep, as "At ev'ry line they stretch, they yawn, they doze" (II.366, 390). Pope replicates this falling asleep "At every line" of his own poem, with the process of the dunces falling asleep at the end of Book II taking over 60 lines. The dunce-head's submission is long, but always inevitable.

The most distinctive action of the dunce-head, however, and the one that provides the most insight into the Pope's criticism, is the words and style of speaking of the dunces' language. Again appearing during Book II, the competition of the dunces when they "Now turn to diff'rent sports (the Goddess cries), / And learn, my sons, the wond'rous pow'r of Noise" includes a long description of the sounds of the dunces in a true representation of Pope's mock-epic style (II.221-222). Recall my initial description of the volume control in the model of the dunce-head when reading the following lines:

Now thousand tongues are heard in one loud din:
 The Monkey-mimics rush discordant in;
 'Twas chatt'ring, grinning, mouthing, jabb'ring all,
 And Noise and Norton, Brangling and Breval,
 Dennis and Dissonance, and captious Art,
 And Snip-snap short, and Interruption smart,
 And Demonstration thin, and Theses thick,
 And Major, Minor, and Conclusion quick.
 Hold (cry'd the queen) a Cat-call each shall win;
 Equal your merits! equal is your din!
 But that this well-disputed game may end,
 Sound forth, my brayers, and the welkin rend. (II.235-246)

Chaos and dissonant voices rule the atmosphere of this quotation. Again, the participants are given animalistic or inhuman qualities; they are "Monkey-mimics," humanlike but decidedly less than human. They can do nothing but copy, and copy poorly, in harsh tones reminiscent of their animal kin; embedded in this comparison is the criticism of how the dunces worked with and used classical source material. This competition replicates the marketplace the dunces were participating in, with thousands of voices, all with nonsense and "sound" and poor content. Note, of course, that it is exactly the "sound" for which Dulness has asked; the emissions of the dunce-head are to "shake the soul," "to madness swell," and to "sink in sorrows" (II.227, 228). In fact, the dunces are to improve upon these arts of the play-house through pure noise with no reliance on the mechanical help of the theatre. Meanwhile, in his poetry Pope recreates the hectic and overwhelming tone and noise of the scene through the repetitive "ing" endings in the list. In a similar way, the dunces' names are brought into the fray and are treated as the same thing as noise; Maynard Mack notes how "as the names slide into verse they tend to take on a metaphorical coloring . . . as Noise, Brangling, Dissonance swallow up Norton, Breval, and Dennis" (42). The consonance and assonance of lines like "snip-snap short" not only lend power to the obvious meaning of the lines, but are also reminiscent of the lines in Book I that described Cibber's broken skull. Just as Cibber's brains are conceptualized in "Zig-zags" with one pattern scarcely beginning before it has changed direction, so too do the dunces' discourses follow this chaotic pattern (or lack thereof). Interestingly enough, they are judged on two factors: their

“merits” and their “din,” which are both equal. No harmony exists in this noise, only the “discordant” rush of voices and animal-like sounds.

This skill in making noise is not limited to the winners of the competition, and Pope emphasizes that noise-making is a general dunce-head trait. The next stanza is similar in tone to the above with a stronger focus on how to “the welkin rend”:

As when the long’ear’d milky mothers wait
At some sick miser’s triple-bolted gate,
For their defrauded, absent foals they make
A moan so loud, that all the guild awake;
...
So swells each wind-pipe; Ass intones to Ass,
Harmonic twang! of leather, horn, and brass;
...
But far o’er all, sonorous Blackmore’s strain;
Walls, steeples, skies, bray back to him again.
In Tot’nam fields, the brethren with amaze
Prick all their ears up, and forget to graze;
Long Chanc’ry-lane retentive rolls the sound,
And courts to courts return it round and round;
Thames wafts it thence to Rufus’ roaring hall,
And Hungerford re-echoes bawl for bawl.
All hail him victor in both gifts of song,
Who sings so loudly, and who sings so long. (II.247-268)

This quotation, lengthy even with excerpts, emphasizes the chaos and sheer noise of the scene. Blackmore’s call is powerful, and cannot be avoided; it echoes throughout London, from “Rufus’ roaring hall” in the west to “Hungerford” in the east. Again, Pope reinforces the “noise” of the dunces’ communications by focusing on the comparison to the “long-ear’d milky mothers” and the ever-echoing cacophony of Blackmore. Here, too, Pope reaffirms the animalistic characterization of the dunces. Just as earlier the various Grub Street hacks and patrons were called “Monkey-mimics,” now, Blackmore, a notable dunce with an extended role, is directly compared to asses. Throughout the *Dunciad*, Pope constructs the dunce-head as being animalistic

but achieves the affinity best with the common comparisons to the ass. Blackmore is explicitly constructed as being the donkeys' "brethren" with lines such as "So swells each wind-pipe; Ass intones to Ass," and the extended simile comparing him to "As when the long-ear'd milky mothers wait / At some sick miser's triple-bolted gate" (II.247-248). Although in Book IV, Busby claims that "Since Man from beast by Words is known, / Words are Man's province, Words we teach alone," the earlier sections of the *Dunciad* subvert the idea of their "Words" having meaning (IV.149-150). Rather, the primary agency that the dunces have is what animals also have: noise-making.

Dunce-heads are dynamic in other ways as well, and, significantly, having the skull of a dunce is not a permanent state. Recall, for instance, how during the diving competition

Then * essay'd; scarce vanish'd out of sight,

He buoys up instant, and returns to light:

He bears no token of the sabler streams,

And mounts far off among the Swans of Thames. (II.295-298)

*, or actor Aaron Hill whose role changed in the *Dunciad* along with his complicated relationship with Pope, emerges with "no token" of the activities in which he has been involved. His skull, so light that it "buoys up instant," stands in stark contrast to other divers like Arnall with his "weight of skull" (II.321). All is not lost for repenting dunce-heads; indeed, they even have the potential to be one of the "Swans of Thames," related to Shakespeare who was called the "swan of Avon" in stark contrast to the monster-owls of Dulness. Swans also make the comparatively clean Thames, rather than the disgusting Fleet Ditch, their home. Even the established dunces are aware of the danger of their protégés defecting; in Book IV, Busby, an educator, laments that

Pity! The charm works only in our wall,

Lost, lost too soon in yonder House or Hall.

There truant WYNDHAM ev'ry Muse gave o'er,

There TALBOT sunk, and was a Wit no more!

How sweet an Ovid, MURRAY was our boast!

How many Martials were in PULT'NEY lost! (IV.165-170)

The control over the dunce-heads is compared to confinement, as Dulness' hold over Wyndham and the other students is a "charm." Here, however, Pope wants readers to have explicit

examples of those who turned away from Dulness. Even dunces who have been trained and raised as hacks can escape.

These final layers of meaning contribute in crucial ways to Pope's construction of the dunce-head. If the skulls of the dunces were simply objects that could be ignored and had no influence, they would pose no danger to society. However, a head that may be easily stuffed with detrimental knowledge or that may bray incoherently is dangerous because it can create more dunce-heads in its image, despite the rare occurrence of a dunce turning away from Dulness.

Conclusion

In Book I of the *Dunciad* when Dulness is surveying her growing herd of dunces, "In each she marks her Image full exprest" (I.107). The dunces, and their heads, are expressions of Dulness in multiple ways — in their facial expressions, their headgear, and even the shape of their ears. However, these representations of Dulness do not just function as a way for Pope to mock his enemies; rather, the *Dunciad* functions as a stage from which Pope can express his scorn, anger, and fear over a dramatically shifting British print culture. This perceived downfall centered on people's heads: what they read, thought, wrote and consumed. In turn, Pope constructs the dunce-head as a critical axis in this textual and cultural degradation. The heads of those like Cibber with their "Zig-zags of lead" create the conditions for when "thy dread Empire, CHAOS! Is restor'd" "And Universal Darkness buries All" (IV.653, 656). While the text is clearly satirical in nature, always behind the work are the sincere concerns of Pope. Contained in the dunce-head are Pope's anxieties: the likes of Cibber being judged good enough to become Poet Laureate, universities producing hacks and sycophants, classical literature being misunderstood and misrepresented, and, overall, the power of dunces to create more dunces. The satirical function of the dunce-head is not simply to mark the dunces as objects of both scorn and concern, but also as a warning to the readers to avoid Cibber's gaze lest they, too, become servants of Dulness.

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